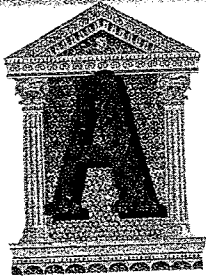


# 15 Rome and Christianity



**New Religion** The Roman Empire must have been an interesting place to live. People of different backgrounds, speaking different languages, made up this diverse empire. In addition, the Pax Romana of the first century A.D. made it possible for people to travel around the empire easily.

People practiced many different religions and believed in all kinds of gods and goddesses. In the marketplace of one of the cities in the empire, such as Antioch or Damascus, one might find goods from far away places, see Roman soldiers, and meet people from all over. Not only traders and merchants could be found in the marketplace but also teachers and philosophers, would-be healers and miracle workers, and preachers of new religions.

About the year A.D. 40, people in the larger cities of the empire began to hear stories about a new religion whose followers believed in a man called Jesus Christ. They heard that he had been a Jew from Palestine. His followers said he had died and been raised to life again. He was going to come back to earth and bring the Kingdom of God. His followers believed all this so strongly that many of them had changed their lives completely. A few of his followers, including a man named Paul, traveled around the empire, trying to convince people to believe in this Christ.

Most Romans ignored the new religion. Especially in the cities of the empire, there was always someone with a new religion, a new report of a miracle, or a prophecy about the future. These Christians, as they were called, were just one tiny part of a large complicated empire. But others paid more attention to these Christians—and it was not always favorable attention.

## Rome Feels Threatened

Jesus had lived in Palestine and had preached first to the Jewish community. So his first followers continued to spread his teachings among the

Jews of the Middle East. Very quickly, however, arguments started in the Jewish community about these new Christian ideas. Some of these arguments ended up in shoving matches and riots. The authorities had to be called in to calm things down. Sometime around A.D. 36, a fight between Jews and Christians in Jerusalem ended with a Christian named Stephen being stoned to death. He was the first known Christian **martyr**—the first Christian killed because of his religious beliefs.

As time went on, Jewish communities rejected members who believed in Jesus Christ. Gradually, Judaism and Christianity became two different religions with very different beliefs. Christians continued to preach around the empire and start new communities.

Sometimes there were problems between Christians and people who had an interest in preserving other religions. The early Christian preacher Paul was once arrested in the city of Ephesus (EF ih sus) because silversmiths who made statues of

a Greek goddess felt that he was hurting their business. Christians in other places were beaten or arrested because

their attempts at preaching started arguments in public. Elsewhere, Christians were blamed for other problems that had arisen. Christians were a new group that people didn't know much about, so they were easy to blame.

### vocabulary

**martyr** someone who is killed for his or her religious or other personal beliefs

During the second and third centuries, the Roman Empire began facing serious troubles. The empire had grown so large that it took a long time for communications to travel between Rome and other cities. The army and governors of provinces were often cruel or corrupt. Worse, people outside the empire, especially in Europe, began to try to conquer parts of it.

The Romans knew their empire would be strong and united if people were loyal. To the Romans, loyalty meant several things. It meant paying taxes to Rome, and it meant taking part in rituals and ceremonies that were part of the Roman process of government. Many of these rituals and ceremonies were religious and required making offerings to the gods, who were believed to protect Rome. The Romans had many gods and goddesses. Some emperors, such as Julius Caesar and Augustus, had even been declared gods after they died. The Romans were also clear about what happened to people who were not loyal. They held public executions to make their point. People who were not loyal risked horrible deaths.

As the numbers of Christians grew, they were often seen as troublemakers. But were they actually disloyal to Rome?

Christians claimed that they were loyal to Rome. They pointed out a teaching they had from Jesus: "Render unto Caesar the things

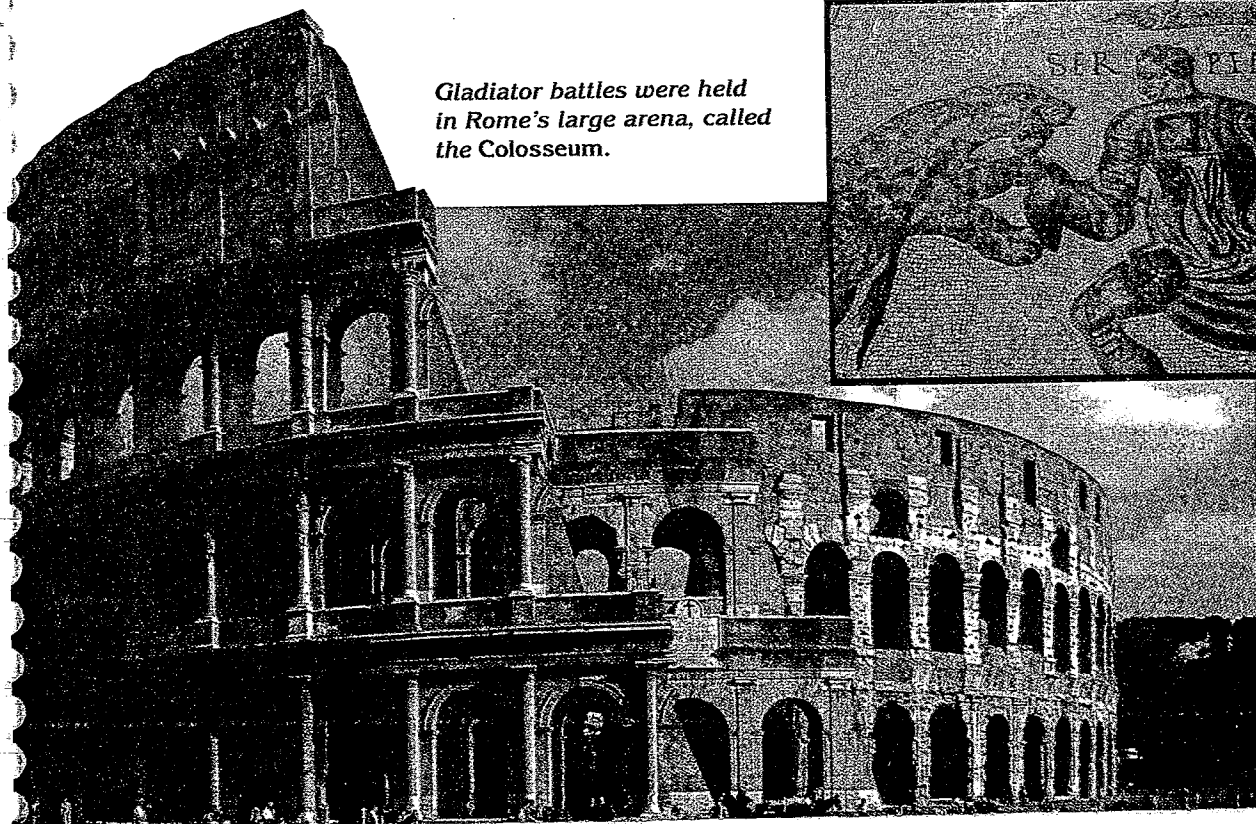
which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). For Christians, this was a clear proof that there was no conflict between Christian faith and Roman citizenship. A Christian could pay the taxes that the emperors required and remain loyal to the Roman government while worshiping and obeying God.

But the Romans weren't so sure. They began requiring Christians to make offerings to Roman gods and goddesses as a way of showing that they were good citizens. Christians refused to do this because they felt the Roman gods and goddesses were false. They only offered worship to their own God. When they refused to obey the Romans, they were arrested and sometimes executed. They might be thrown to wild beasts to be torn apart and eaten, or they might be forced to participate in gladiator battles.

Gladiators were slaves, prisoners of war, or condemned criminals whose lives the Romans already considered worthless. These people were forced to fight to the death against wild animals or one another in Roman coliseums.

**vocabulary**  
**coliseum** a large  
theater or sports arena

*Gladiator battles were held in Rome's large arena, called the Colosseum.*



Until A.D. 310, Christians faced **persecution** throughout the Roman Empire, at times just because they were Christians. Although the persecution did not take place everywhere and was not continual, this was a difficult time for the growing church.

**vocabulary**  
**persecution**  
harassment or  
oppression

At first, Roman leaders seemed to think that by persecuting Christians, they were going to make citizens more loyal and the empire more united. Just the opposite happened. Many people began to sympathize with those who were being killed for being disloyal. The persecuted Christians were admired for their calmness, courage, and willingness to stand up for their beliefs. These same characteristics were also important to the Romans.

Christians were also well organized, another characteristic that the Romans admired. They belonged to communities, had leaders, and could efficiently gather donations and resources to help when people—including non-Christians—faced disaster from fires, floods, or famines. Moreover, it meant something to be a Christian during a time when people were beginning to wonder if it meant anything at all to be a Roman. To become a Christian, a person had to go through a period of training and study. Christians were expected

to live their lives according to their beliefs. Not every Christian did, of course, especially as the church grew larger, but the expectation was there. It seemed as if persecuting the Christians made people aware of some of the benefits of being a Christian.

### A Christian Roman Empire

By the beginning of the fourth century, the Roman Empire looked like it was falling apart, and Christianity was the strongest, fastest-growing religion in the empire. The emperor Constantine decided that he might be able to use Christianity as a kind of glue to hold the empire together.

Constantine signed the Edict of Milan in 313. This document made Christianity a legal religion. Christians no longer had to prove their loyalty to the Roman Empire. They had the right to be part of the empire. From this point on,

Christianity prospered in the Roman Empire. More and more people became Christians, and

Constantine actively promoted the religion as a way to strengthen the empire. Some say that he was baptized on his deathbed. His mother had been a Christian, but throughout his life, he was not. Still, because the Roman Empire eventually became a Christian empire, Constantine is remembered as a Christian emperor. Almost all his successors were devoted Christians, and by the end of the fourth century, they were persecuting followers of Rome's old pagan religions.



*Christianity grew during the reign of Emperor Constantine. This wall painting depicts him with a Christian saint.*